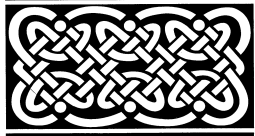


CALEDON



INSTITUTE OF  
SOCIAL POLICY

## ***communities and schools***

May 2000

ISBN # 1-894598-03-2

### ***Richmond School District Builds on a Strong Foundation***

#### ***Welcome to Richmond, BC***

Most visitors to the Vancouver area know Richmond only as the location of the international airport, and they may have noticed that it is situated on an island in the mouth of the Fraser River. Richmond is also a cosmopolitan urban community with a population of 165,000. A relaxed community with farming and fishing roots, until 1980 Richmond was considered a suburb of Vancouver. Over the last 20 years, many Asians have

immigrated to the area, altering the demographics and cultural composition of the community. Perhaps because an island creates its own sense of boundary and distinction, and perhaps because many residents have strong memories of the area's farming and fishing history, Richmond has been successful in maintaining its closely-knit community connections while it has become more diverse.

School District Number 38 Superintendent of Schools, Chris Kelly, feels that Richmond's community sense is very real. Says Chris: "Organizations and community members are very involved in our work and are generally supportive of what we do. People here are highly informed and they are aware of the roots of cooperation that have always existed among parents, local businesses and school district personnel. This is the kind of community people return to once they establish a career, and many are core residents who never left. Other Vancouver communities are similar in the quality of relationships they've encouraged, but Richmond has something extra."

*The communities and schools series was launched by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy with support from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation. The case for education as a public good in Canada is compelling. Strong public schools and healthy communities that share responsibility for the well-being of youth are crucial to our country's future. Through stories and commentaries that link theory and practice, we hope to help inform citizens' understanding of education issues and engage them more deeply in their communities and schools.*

School district personnel recently were challenged to take a hard look at their ability to resolve differences in educational outlook. In 1998, a group of parents came to the district's board of education and requested the establishment of a traditional school. District personnel proved themselves equal to the task of identifying the key issues which lay at the heart of the parents' request, mapping out a response which respected the views of teachers and the parent group, and effecting an overall improvement in district communications.

***Key personalities***

Chris Kelly was appointed to the district's superintendent position six years ago, and was attracted to the job partly because it would provide him the opportunity to work with Bruce Beirsto. Bruce had been with the Richmond School District for more than 20 years, employed as a teacher and vice-principal before moving to district administrative work. Chris Kelly was an Assistant Superintendent with another district when the Superintendent of Schools position opened in Richmond, and he and Bruce have worked out an effective partnership along with others in the district. Bruce is now Associate Superintendent.

The school district educates 24,500 students in 50 schools (ten secondary schools, Grades 8 through 12). It employs a teaching force of 1,400 and a support staff of 900. Approximately 45 percent of the student population speak English as a second language.

In the spring of 1999, the School District established an initiative called Foundations which details the district's commitment to "clarity, consistency and communication in the partnership among parents, teachers and students."<sup>1</sup> It



*Superintendent of Schools, Chris Kelly.*

describes the rights, duties and responsibilities of each group and makes explicit the operating principles at play in the school district. It lays a firm groundwork both for Canadians who received their education here and for new Canadians.

***The foundations of Foundations***

Foundations was the end result of two very different processes. Bruce Beirsto and Chris Kelly had been discussing for some years the importance of articulating a district initiative which would describe the organization's values and principles. They felt it was time to draw together a non-negotiable foundation statement which would summarize all that was present in

the district's educational offerings – teaching methods, curriculum presentation and defined parent roles.

“Mission statements have been around for a long time,” says Chris Kelly, “but we were looking for something deeper and richer. We saw that with the process of ongoing change in educational focus, combined with staff turnovers that averaged between 150 to 200 new teachers per year, we were experiencing a degree of tension that came from trying to preserve the sense of Richmond's culture.”

The second element that led to the creation of the Foundations document was the submission in the spring of 1998 from members of Richmond's Asian community which called for the establishment of a traditional school.

“This was the second time in two years that such a submission was made,” says Chris. “In 1996, a smaller group requested the creation of a traditional school and Richmond's board spent months studying the issue in terms of what it was committed to philosophically. In the end, they voted against creating a traditional school by a margin of 6:1. The most significant result of the research was that we came to understand that the fundamental issue behind the request was the need or desire for guarantees of clarity and consistency in education.”

When the second application was made in March 1998, the group was much larger and more determined in their efforts to open what they considered a more academically rigorous school for their children. “They had put everything on the line to come to Canada, and they wanted to ensure a healthy education for their children, which, for them, meant a replication of their home school system,” says Chris. At the March meeting, the board Chairperson raised a motion to



*Associate Superintendent, Bruce Bearsto.*

approve in principle the concept of a traditional school, and a majority of members voted in favour of the motion.

“There was a strong feeling that the motion's presentation ran contrary to how things had customarily been done in Richmond,” says Chris. “However, a motion was passed in June that a special committee of the board be formed to develop a proposal which would reflect the culture and philosophy of the district, address the underlying issues and reflect the demands raised by the traditional parents' group. April, May and June were turbulent months.”

Richmond's celebrated community spirit came to the fore. “To their credit, our teacher, administrator and parent associations didn't start

drawing lines in the sand,” says Chris. “They laid out their concerns in specific terms and asked for the board’s help in sorting them out. It was apparent that something needed to be done.”

In response to the frequent and intense discussion initiated by a number of people concerned about the direction of the board’s motion, the Chairperson took the next few months to draw back and reflect on how to make the best of the situation.

At Chris’ request, Reuben Chan initially provided liaison for the board with those members of the Asian community who had brought forward the request for a traditional program. Born in mainland China and educated in Hong Kong, Reuben came to the district in the 1970s. He had served the district for a number of years in a variety of capacities, including acting as the director responsible for developing a Special Education philosophy of inclusion. When the traditional schools motion was passed in June 1998, he was in his final year as an elementary school principal. His experience with both the Canadian and Chinese school systems made him uniquely qualified to help bridge the gap between Richmond’s Asian community and its school district.

Says Chris: “It was a fortunate coincidence that at the same time that the board reached its decision to strike this committee, Reuben was retiring from his position in the district. He had long commanded huge respect among district trustees and the board chair; we all knew him as a man of integrity. He took us all by the hand and helped us to understand the complexity of the Chinese-Canadian culture and the breadth of its influence.”

Reuben continues to represent the school district at Chinese community meetings, speak-

ing knowledgeably about the system to which he himself is devoted. He became the means of entering the Asian community’s information network, and Chris feels that without him, the district might have been in jeopardy of alienating its Chinese community.

### ***The three Cs***

The Traditional Program Planning Committee was struck in June 1998, co-chaired by Reuben Chan at the request of the board chairperson. The committee included 12 members with representation from parents, teachers, support staff, administrators and trustees. The group was charged with thinking, reading and writing over the summer months, and reconvened in September. Under Reuben’s careful leadership, members conducted thorough research on traditional programs, and they worked to identify and clarify the underlying issues. In February 1999, they presented their findings to the board. These findings confirmed earlier notions that the request for a traditional program arose from underlying issues of clarity, consistency and communication between teachers and parents.

Ultimately, the committee made a proposal in February 1999 that the board commit the entire district to developing a definition of the relationship among parents, teachers and students which was based on the three key attributes (clarity, consistency and communication). The district would work to articulate the roles and responsibilities of each group.

By now, the Chinese lobby group which made the submission had had time to evaluate the situation more fully, and with Reuben’s continued presence at meetings and in the Chinese media, a greater understanding of the school district’s position was developing. In March 1999,

the board and all concerned came to the common realization that they were not talking about one program, but about a commitment that would pervade all district programs. At this point, these thoughts were drawn together as the Foundations initiative, and the motion to commit to the three Cs was passed unanimously.

### *Setting goals*

Since June 1999, it has been the district's goal to model clarity, consistency and communication to every employee. Regular meetings to explore the concepts and solicit feedback have been held with teachers, administrators, support staff and parents in every school.

In the longer term, the goal is to have Foundations so well ingrained in everyone's consciousness that any incoming parents, teachers or students will get a clear sense of what the district stands for in terms of curriculum delivery and parent involvement.

"Uniformity is not the goal," says Chris Kelly. "We support the professional autonomy of our teachers, but we all recognize that our curriculum delivery has to be consistent throughout the district."

All parties agree that it will be very important to properly evaluate Foundations, but that it is now too early in the process to undertake a formal evaluation. Rather, board members are seeking feedback on three key questions to find out what is happening in district schools. First, they want to know how teachers and administrators feel the three attributes have been reflected in relationships throughout the year, both positively and negatively. Second, they are being asked to identify what they feel should be



*Traditional Program Planning Committee Chairperson, Reuben Chan.*

done to maintain or improve these attributes. Finally, they are being asked to provide guidance about whether the district could do more or less or alter what it does to support relationships. Simultaneously, the same three questions are being asked of parents and all interested members of the Richmond community.

Says Chris: "Evaluating a district initiative on its own can be nonproductive. We're more interested in the evidence of the relationships and how people's lived experiences can help us adjust our programming. We want to encourage people to look at their practices and ask themselves some hard questions. That's where the real growth begins."

***Communication is a community affair***

In response to the important debate sparked by the request for a traditional program, Bruce Beirsto wrote a series of discussion papers called ‘Hot Topics.’ This series was presented as a mechanism for encouraging two-way dialogue among parent councils, teaching staffs and administrators. Each paper incorporates research summaries and questions for discussion and is meant to help the district arrive at a position on a specific subject. Topics include homework policies, combined classes, discipline, teacher autonomy, reporting and conferencing.

Says Bruce: “The ‘Hot Topics’ papers grew out of earlier ideas we’d developed around getting parents more involved and more informed about educational issues. Once parents begin to ask informed questions, teacher attitudes and behaviours begin to change. All of our work really comes out of the community’s value base and our ongoing desire to continue living the beliefs we held about holding one another in mutual regard. The Foundations work allowed us to bundle a whole lot of ideas and values into a working whole.”

***Necessary tension***

Mid-year, teacher representatives requested a meeting with Chris and Bruce to air concerns regarding the actual origins and intent of the initiative. Teachers felt comfortable meeting collectively with Bruce and Chris about Foundations, and they candidly aired their concerns and suspicions about the initiative’s real intent.

Says Chris: “Those discussions had the effect of helping everyone achieve much greater clarity about the initiative’s intent. All parties



*Richmond District Parents Association President, Jean Garnett.*

recognized that in this particular situation we needed a clear, timely response. Normally, we would have worked to develop a combined response to the request for a traditional school, but in this situation, we didn’t have the benefit of time.”

Once the teachers’ union representatives had aired their concern that their input should have been solicited at the outset, they were willing to accept Chris’ explanation and move on.

Chris is pleased with how well people in the system have grasped the Foundations concept. “Considering the number of people involved, it’s



not surprising that it has taken a year to clarify the initiative,” says Chris. “There’s also tremendous variability in how everything’s being translated into action – this is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ situation. Some schools are devoting themselves to a particular aspect of an attribute and some extraordinary things are being done.”

The true measure of how successfully Foundations has been communicated is the fact that the vast majority of curricular and other decisions being made are framed in the context of how they fit into the Foundations framework. “It has become the connective tissue that joins our system together,” says Chris. “When we’re selecting principals or vice-principals or whatever else, we’re talking about Foundations and its connection to the issue at hand.”

### *Lessons learned*

Chris feels that the Foundations exercise afforded a much-needed opportunity for the district to engage with and learn about its new Chinese community members.

“We’ve come to understand that, historically, the Chinese community is less connected with the school system than we had assumed. We need to continue to include one another in discussions about education in order to really hear one another.”

Sometimes those discussions were protracted and difficult. With perseverance, everyone learned that having to explain a concept helps to clarify it for all parties. Richmond District Parents Association President, Jean Garnett, remembers one such discussion surrounding the concept of consistency that bogged down over what was actually meant by the word.

Says Jean: “I turned to Reuben Chan and asked him what the Chinese translation was for ‘consistency.’ His answer was that it means ‘uniformity.’ Such subtle differences in meaning can significantly alter intention. Reuben also pointed out that our primary curriculum philosophy of continuous improvement has no Chinese equivalent. In the end, we talked about consistency of principle, not output. We saw this as a way of reaching the same goals by using different roads.”

Clarifying words and clarifying intent went hand in hand. Dealing with the teachers’ union brought Chris face to face with the fact that people do not always understand what we wish them to hear. Some teachers felt that Foundations was simply a smart political answer to a difficult situation; the real origins were unclear in their minds.

Says Chris: “If I had to offer advice to others in a similarly difficult political situation, I’d say that the first thing to do is create yourself some time. However precipitous something is, give yourself some thinking and reflective time. Without that, decisions with far-reaching impacts can be taken prematurely. If you’re not dealing with the impetus of a political issue, then the important thing is to have your own end in mind. If you don’t have an end, find one – things can’t be built in the air. Get teachers, administrators and parents engaged from the start. Everyone should be a contributor to the design.”

Musing on the ways in which communities are formed, Bruce Beairsto says: “Building community is a lifelong task. It’s not easy or smooth, and it may choose its own path. You need to take a long view and recognize that keeping a community alive and growing is an organic process. The health and fruits of the community

rely on a strong commitment to real values which have to be reviewed and renewed regularly. It's a process that requires deep thought and sincere motivation."

*Anne Makhoul*

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**Endnote**

1. Foundations. (1999). School District No. 38, Richmond, June.

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